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ABSTRACT

The technique of inviting children to discuss their writing and examining closely the nature of their comments can help to identify facets of the writing process upon which to base pedagogy. An analysis of the writing process of one sixth grade female student in an Edmonton, Canada, public school revealed the use of 38 communication units (labels derived from numerous readings of the comments on their writing of seven stories by each of six sixth grade able writers). Each label was defined in terms of its use as a description of the facet of the composing process to which the child referred. In the specific case studied, 14 different labels were necessary to identify the various facets of composing in one of her stories. Systematic analysis of comment may not be possible in busy classrooms; however, children's needs may emerge from their comments and curriculum decisions may be made based on these needs. (HOD)

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I WENT AROUND ASKING GUYS WHAT KIND OF STORIES THEY LIKED

F R A N K N O L A N

PRINCIPAL LECTURER

AQUINAS COLLEGE

BALLARAT

VICTORIA

AUSTRALIA

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"I WENT AROUND ASKING GUYS WHAT KIND OF STORIES THEY LIKED."

Debbie is one of a rare variety of children. She writes because she likes to write. I met Debbie when she was ten years old, a grade 6 student in an Edmonton public school. Debbie served as a willing subject in a research project I was conducting on the writing processes of grade 6 able writers (Nolan, 1978). Over a period of seven weeks, I met with Debbie twice a week on consecutive days. In a tiny storeroom assigned by the principal for our use, Debbie wrote stories for me while I studied the writing process "in process." I would introduce some stimulus or topic for writing and then, while Debbie wrote, I would record the writing act on videotape, using two cameras. One camera, focused over Debbie's shoulder, recorded the actual graphic process. Another camera, located in front of Debbie, was used to record facial expressions and bodily movements during non-writing segments of the composition.

I encouraged Debbie to talk to herself as she wrote. She did this quite willingly and thus we had sound as well as picture on the videotape of her writing. When she had finished writing, I would play segments of the videotape and ask her to tell me all she could remember about how she had made up the story. Thus, the videotape served to stimulate Debbie's recall of cognitive activity engaged in during the writing process.

WRITING FOR AN AUDIENCE

Being the eldest of four children, Debbie had found an enthusiastic audience for her writing in her three younger brothers. She showed me pages of writing, including some verse, mostly illustrated, which she had written for the boys. Debbie's parents agreed to being interviewed by me as part of my data gathering, and while I visited them at home, Debbie showed me her writing carefully stored in her bedroom, a room literally packed with books. Debbie's parents encouraged her writing and reading. Thus, I found that Debbie operated in an environment in which her writing was accepted and taken seriously.

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A "SWAP-AROUND" STORY

Debbie had written four videotaped stories for me when I suggested that she write a story suitable for other grade 6 children. I was working with six individual child writers at the time and had suggested to all that they write a story to be circulated among the others. We called this a "swap-around story."

The six children consisted of three from each of two public schools. Hence, each child knew two others of the group, but not the other three. As a result, the audience for the story would consist of both known and unknown peers.

Debbie's story was written at home in the six day interval between two of our meetings. I allowed her to choose her own topic for the story. This is Debbie's story:

HELP!

Prolegue

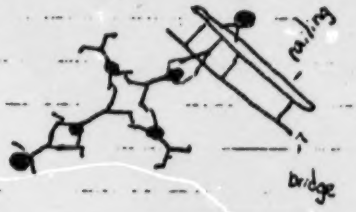
"Don't go on the river, Jon," cautioned Grandma.
"I won't Gran. "Bye!"
But the first he did was swim in the River!

O

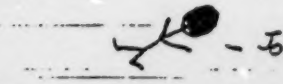
Jon was rapidly swept through the current. He realized he was going through the sluice! An icy fear swept over him. The sluice churned up water about 15 ~~feet~~ yards away. Every fifteen feet there was a bridge. If only he could save himself! Three bridges left. Could he grab one? He was nearing the first bridge. He couldn't reach the bank. Jon screamed hysterically again and again. A group of boys saw him. Quickly they threw him a rope. But the current was too strong. It snapped. The strongest boy tried to swim to him, but the current tore Jon away. Then they ran to the bridge and tried to catch him. Jon was swept too quickly under the bridge. One more bridge left. Could they save him? They raced to the third bridge and formed a chain*. "Hold up your hand!"

Jon held it up, and they grabbed it. They managed to pull Jon onto the bridge. He was safe.

End.



* Diagram



COMMENTS BY THE AUTHOR

When Debbie brought the story to me, I switched on my audio tape recorder and asked her to tell me about the writing of "Help!" The transcript of Debbie's comments is given below. I have analysed the transcript in a way which indicates both the complexity of the composing process and the coherence with which this ten year old child can describe some facets of the process.

Debbie's comments have been segmented into "communication units" defined by Loban (1976) as each "independent clause with its modifiers"(p.105). This syntactic segmentation facilitates focus on the semantic intent of each of Debbie's comments.

Some language which, while serving a real purpose in oral communication, has no real meaning when transcribed has been marked with a cross and deleted from the analysis. Thus, language including "um," "sort of," "you know," "like" have been deleted. The false start, "I was," in the second line has been deleted while the "yes" and "no" answers to my questions, which also convey little meaning in themselves, have also been eliminated from the analysis.

ANALYSING THE COMMENTS

Each of Debbie's statements has been assigned a label which attempts to identify a facet of the overall process of composing to which she refers. For example, Debbie speaks firstly about the title of her story. Thus, the first statement is labelled "Titling." She then goes on to refer to the theme or moral of her story which she tries to embody in the title: "he was sort of bad and he didn't do as he was supposed to, and he could have drowned or something." This communication unit is labelled "Theme or Moral."

The labels assigned to the communication units are taken from a total of 43 such labels which I derived after numerous readings of the comments on their writing of seven stories by each of six grade 6 able writers (Nolan, 1979). Each label was defined in terms of its use as a description of the facet of composing process to which the child referred. In Debbie's case,14 different labels were necessary to identify the various facets of composing

to which she referred in her comments on "Help!" In Debbie's case, the labels are, I believe, self-explanatory.

In the transcript the labels are inserted above the relevant communication unit. D. stands for Debbie and R. for the Researcher (myself).

Here is the transcript of Debbie's comments analysed in terms of facets of composing process.

D: TITLING When I, (um,) put the title "Help" or "Don't go near the water," (I was,) I crossed out the "Don't go near the water" because it didn't fit, (sort of,) because, (you know,) that's what his Grandma cautioned him, and that didn't really have anything to do with the story. THEME/MORAL "Help" did because he was sort of bad, and he didn't do as he was supposed to, and he could have drowned or something. (Um,) SEARCHING FOR AN IDEA I was going to have him killed, and chopped up by the sluice and everything, REJECTING AN IDEA but I didn't know how to write about that kind of thing because I'd never seen anybody in a sluice. GENERAL KNOWLEDGE And I've heard of such things, (you know,) and because he was bad this is his circum, (um,) THEME/MORAL like consequences and that he has to take. SELECTING AN IDEA He wasn't supposed to go near the river and he did. SELECTING AN IDEA When I was writing, I had a little bit of trouble, (you know,) with the name, NAMING but I just picked Jon because that's one of the names. NAMING OF A CHARACTER It's a sort of popular name. Lots of people like the name Jon, NAMING OF A CHARACTER NAMING OF A CHARACTER so I just put it in. I wanted him to be kind of bad because if he was a good little kid, then you can't write anything about good little kids, because it's boring. CHARACTERIZATION But this would be sort of an exciting story, (sort of, you know.) PLANNING THE WRITING He's going to go in the sluice and SELECTING DETAILS

SELECTING DETAILS
he can't save himself, SELECTING DETAILS and some guys try to save him and

SELECTING DETAILS
they can't the first time, SELECTING DETAILS the rope snaps and that.

R: Where did you get that idea of having many times, you know, and the first time they didn't get him, and the second time they didn't get him, and it built up that way?

USING LITERARY KNOWLEDGE
D: Well I sort of got it from Captains Courageous, when Harvey fell into the water, and the boats were going to run him in half and that, (you know.) USING LITERARY KNOWLEDGE But he managed to be saved after all that. USING LITERARY KNOWLEDGE So that's where I sort of got it. USING LITERARY KNOWLEDGE They kept trying to save him USING LITERARY KNOWLEDGE and then finally they did.

R: Are you talking about the television version of Captains Courageous or the book?

USING LITERARY KNOWLEDGE
D: The book.

R: You've read the book?

D: (Yes.)

R: You didn't see the movie on television?

D: (No.)

R: Right, thank you.

R: Deb., how much time did you spend on that story, preparing and writing that story?

D: STARTING THE WRITING
Well I never really started until about Sunday writing it. And STARTING THE WRITING then I had a little bit of trouble because, (you know,) I'd finished reading the book. NAMING A CHARACTER I was wondering should I call the guy Harvey. USING LITERARY KNOWLEDGE I was wondering if I should sort of base it on Captains Courageous or what.

R: Oh I see, yes.

D: ENDING THE WRITING
I finally got the finished product.

R: When you were writing were you thinking of the fact that it was going to be read by other grade 6 students?

D: SENSE OF AUDIENCE
Yes, that's why I sort of made him like, (um,) a grade 6 student. SENSE OF AUDIENCE First of all I went around asking guys what kinds of stories they liked, and, (like,) SEARCHING FOR AN IDEA I was going to write a watch-ma-call-it, oh, a horror story yes, REJECTING AN IDEA but I decided not to because I could have written one and would have been really terrible. But I SELECTING AN IDEA wanted to write this story (sort of and, um,) I gave it SENSE OF AUDIENCE to some people to read SENSE OF AUDIENCE and they said it was all right, so .....

R: All right, is there anything else you'd like to tell me about that one?

D: X (No.)

R: All right, well, thanks very much Debbie.

FACETS OF COMPOSING

In her comments on the writing of "Help!", Debbie used 38 communication units. These referred to the following 14 different facets of the composing of the story:

Titling
Theme or Moral
Searching for an Idea
Rejecting an Idea
Using General Knowledge
Selecting an Idea
Naming of a Character
Planning the Writing
Characterization
Selecting Details
Using Literary Knowledge
Starting the Writing
Ending the Writing
Sense of Audience.

Of course, far more went into the writing of "Help!" than that referred to by Debbie here. However, her comments throw light on certain facets of composing which concerned her. The technique of inviting children to discuss their writing and examining closely the nature of their comments can help us identify facets of writing process upon which to base our teaching. Debbie's comments on this story illustrate certain facets of composing which she considers important.

TITLING

Her comments on titling the story indicate that she considers that a title should attempt to embody the theme or essence of the piece: "He was sort of bad, and he didn't do as he was supposed to."

SELECTING IDEAS

Debbie tells that she toyed with certain ideas, rejecting some because of her lack of knowledge: "I've never seen anybody in a sluice." However, she selected certain details which form the plot: "He's going to go in the sluice and he can't save himself, and some guys try to save him, and they can't the

first time, the rope snaps and that."

SOURCE OF IDEAS

Debbie describes the source of the idea for the story - her reading of Captains Courageous: "When Harvey fell into the water, and the boats were going to run him in half and that ... but he managed to be saved after all that ... They kept trying to save him and then finally they did."

NAMING

Naming her character caused Debbie some concern (I have noticed that young children frequently indicate their concern in naming their characters.) She finally chose Jon because "It's a sort of popular name. Lots of people like the name Jon, so I just put it in."

CHARACTERIZATION

In this short story there is little space for development of a character. However, Debbie's comments reveal her concern for depicting Jon as possessing certain definite traits of character: "I wanted him to be kind of bad because if he was a good little kid, then you can't write anything about good little kids because it's boring." So Jon is a disobedient boy, and, "because he was bad this is his circum, um, like consequences that he has to take."

SENSE OF AUDIENCE

Finally, Debbie reveals a remarkable sense of audience for her writing: "I sort of made him like, um, a grade 6 student. First of all I went around asking guys what kind of stories they liked." Having done this little piece of market research before writing her story, Debbie then tested audience re-action: "I gave it to some people to read and they said it was all right, so ..."

BASING OUR TEACHING ON CHILDREN'S NEEDS

"Help!" is a good little story written by a very intelligent child who has been well taught the fundamentals of reading and writing. However, it is the comments of the young writer, rather than the text of the story itself, which reveals facets of composing in which Debbie is seeking assistance towards her

continuing development as a writer. Recent research is putting the focus on the study of the writing process "in process." Writers are being encouraged to talk about their writing and thus provide insight into the nature of their composing processes. Willing young writers such as Debbie can tell us a great deal about how they put thoughts into words and words on to paper. Teachers may learn a great deal about the writing needs of their students by asking them to talk about the writing of their pieces. Systematic analysis of comment, such as that described here, may not be possible in busy classrooms. However, children's needs may emerge from their comments, and curriculum decisions based on these needs may be made. In this way, the teaching of the writing process, "one of the most complex processes man engages in" (Emig, 1971, p.44), may be made more relevant and effective.

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